

Bombastic Behavior

A LOOK AT THE EVOLUTION OF SPORTS JOURNALISM AND
HOW IT IS PRESENTED

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What is Bombastic Behavior?

“Booyah!”

“Dare I say En Fuego!”

“He could. Go. All. The. Way!”

“Rack Him.”

“Do you believe in miracles?”

If you’ve ever watched ESPN’s *SportCenter*, flipped your radio dial to an all sports radio station, watched vintage sports videos on YouTube, or just casually watched a sporting event between the 1970s into the present era, you’ve heard an announcer, color analyst, host, anchor, or sports personality try to put their own spin on the storytelling aspect of sports.

Sports journalists, in particular broadcast sports journalists, are a different breed of reporter. The idea of objectivity, balance, and unbiased reporting is replaced with language and theatrics that injects the announcer’s point of view. Sports highlights, real-time announcing, and analysis resemble the “Gonzo Journalism” that made Hunter S. Thompson famous. This includes elements like:

- The presence of a first-person, autobiographical narrator who assumes the role of protagonist;
- The participation of a male bonding figure;
- The change of focus from the ostensible subject (Mosser, 2012).

Why does sports journalism get a pass when it comes to objectivity, balance, and unbiased reporting? Entertainment. That’s the simplest answer. For example, ESPN is an acronym for Entertainment and Sports Programming Network. The founders of ESPN acknowledged the idea that they were in the entertainment business. While the sports action

keeps the eyeballs on the screens, the company recognized that there needed to be something sonically pleasurable to keep the ears involved as well. Journalist Brian Lowry makes the perfect analogy for the current optics of sports media.

“The appetite for sports has produced an environment in which a dizzying number of games are televised, each requiring a broadcast team (usually, a bombastic play-by-play guy, an ex-coach/ex-player color man, and a perky sideline reporter).

...Put these factors together, and the trend in sports broadcasting provides a feast for the eyes, perhaps, but an assault on the ears” (Lowry, 2013).

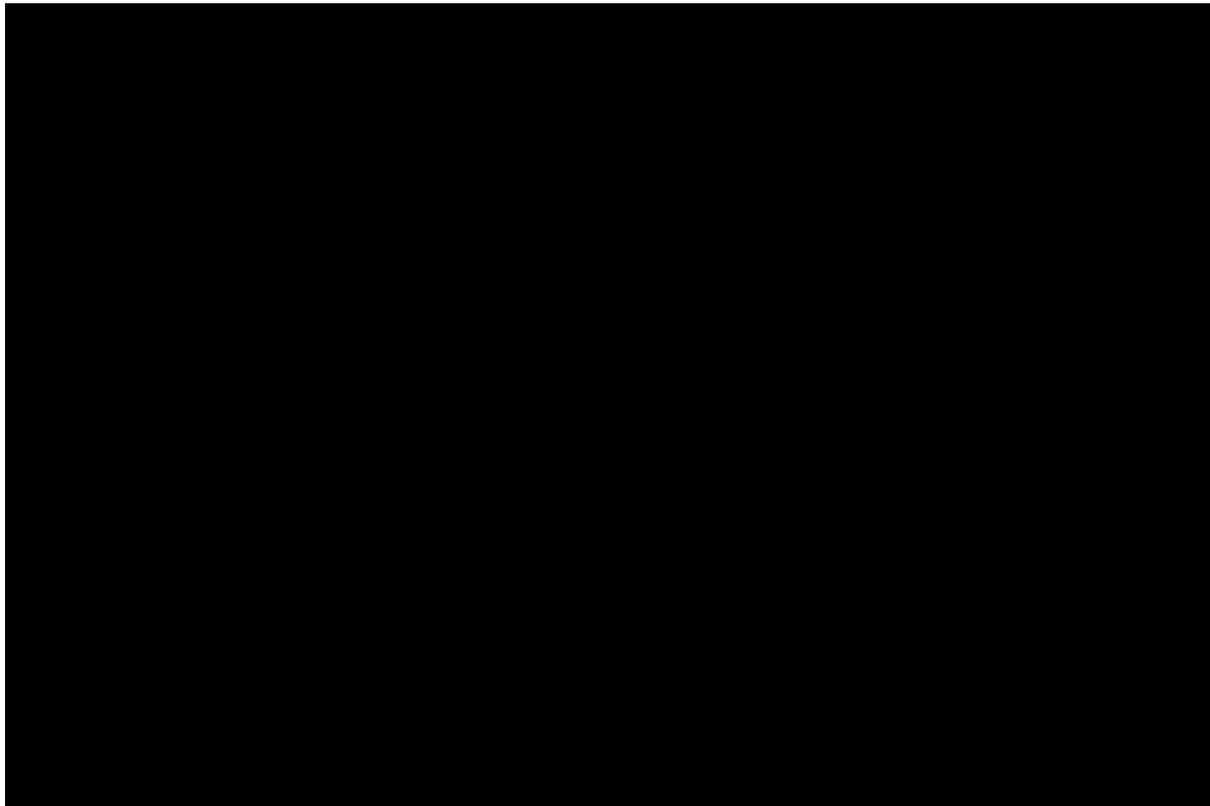
Lowry’s article bemoans a time gone by when respected announcers like Dick Enberg, Vin Scully, and Keith Jackson have been replaced by the “bombast” of announcers like Gus Johnson and Dick Vitale (Lowry, 2013).

This paper will attempt to explain the elements of bombastic behavior in sports broadcasting and how the medium came to be. This will also point out the failures and flaws of this system racially and when it comes to gender. As Lowry aptly puts it, the industry is a “fraternity” in every sense of the word.

Anthony Gunn argues that sports announcing and broadcasting is performative and used in moments of broadcasting gaps in order to “narrativize the event and turning a contest into a story” (Gunn, 2010). I tend to agree with Gunn’s statement due to the use of bombastic actions made by most broadcasters across the industry.

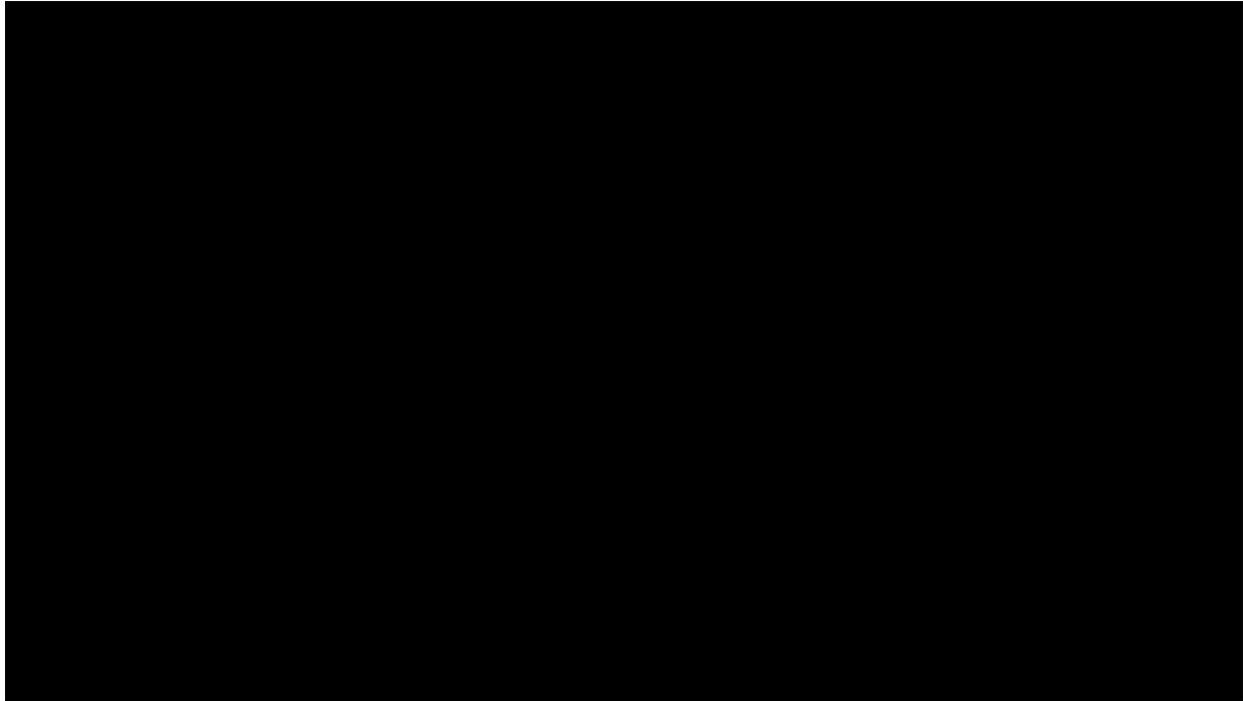
The Influence of Early Personalities

In the 1970s, America was introduced to Monday Night Football. The weekly game presented by ABC became an elaborately produced event complete with a then unheard of three-man announcing team. At its peak of interest in its formative years, the broadcast team consisted of two ex-players in Don Meredith and Frank Gifford and the loquacious and larger than life announcer Howard Cosell.



Cosell soon became must watch TV. He was opinionated, brass, and had what I like to refer to as the “Howard Stern Effect.” Some people loved him and couldn’t wait to hear what he would say next. Other people hated him and couldn’t wait to hear what he’d say next. Like Stern, Cosell’s antics soon became must watch sports TV and ABC Monday Night Football would become the early model for the new direction of sports broadcasting. Unfortunately, Cosell’s

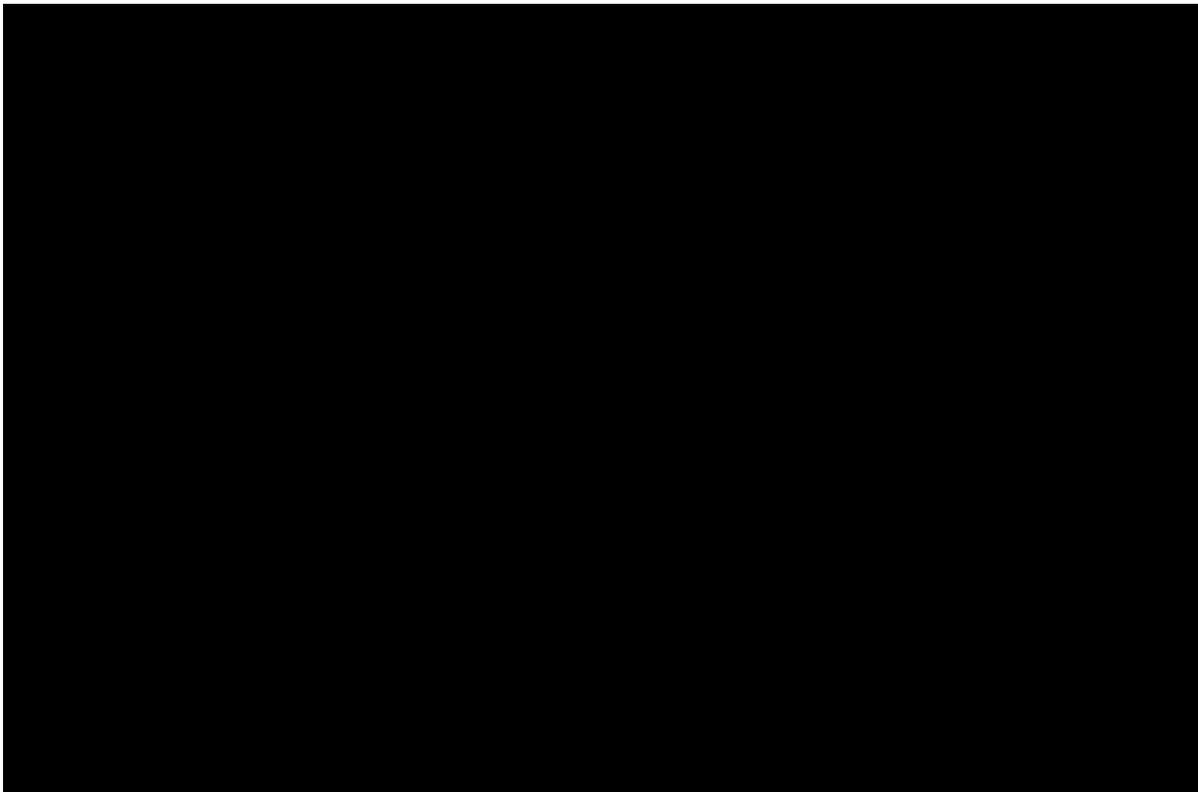
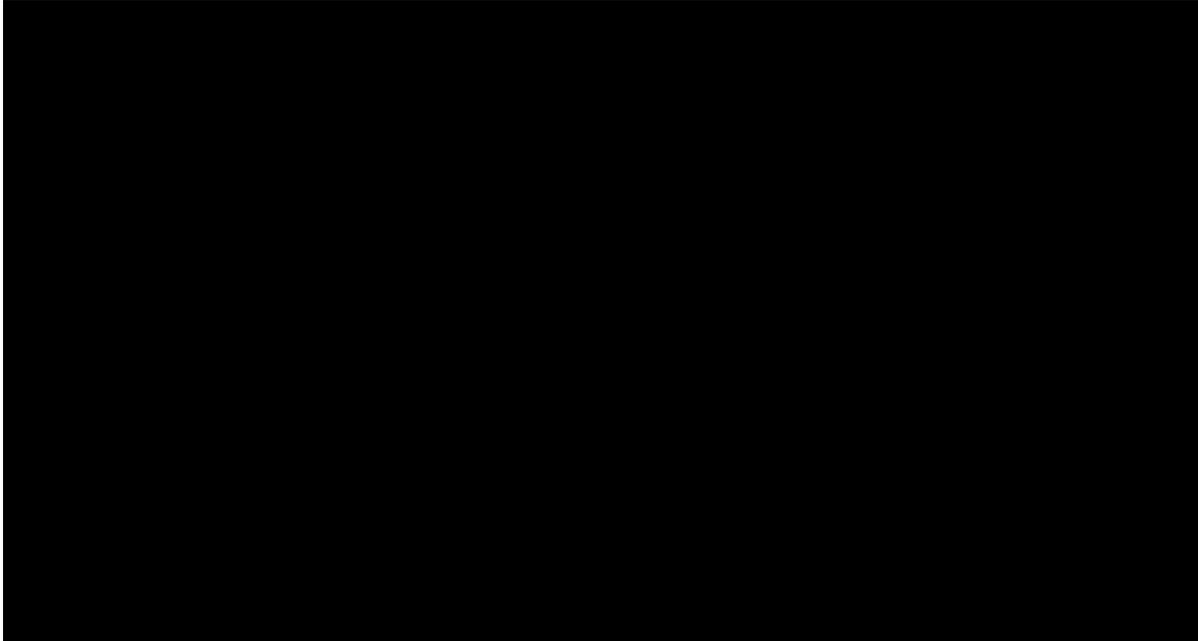
own hubris would eventually be his undoing when he inadvertently referred Washington Redskins' wide receiver to a "little monkey."



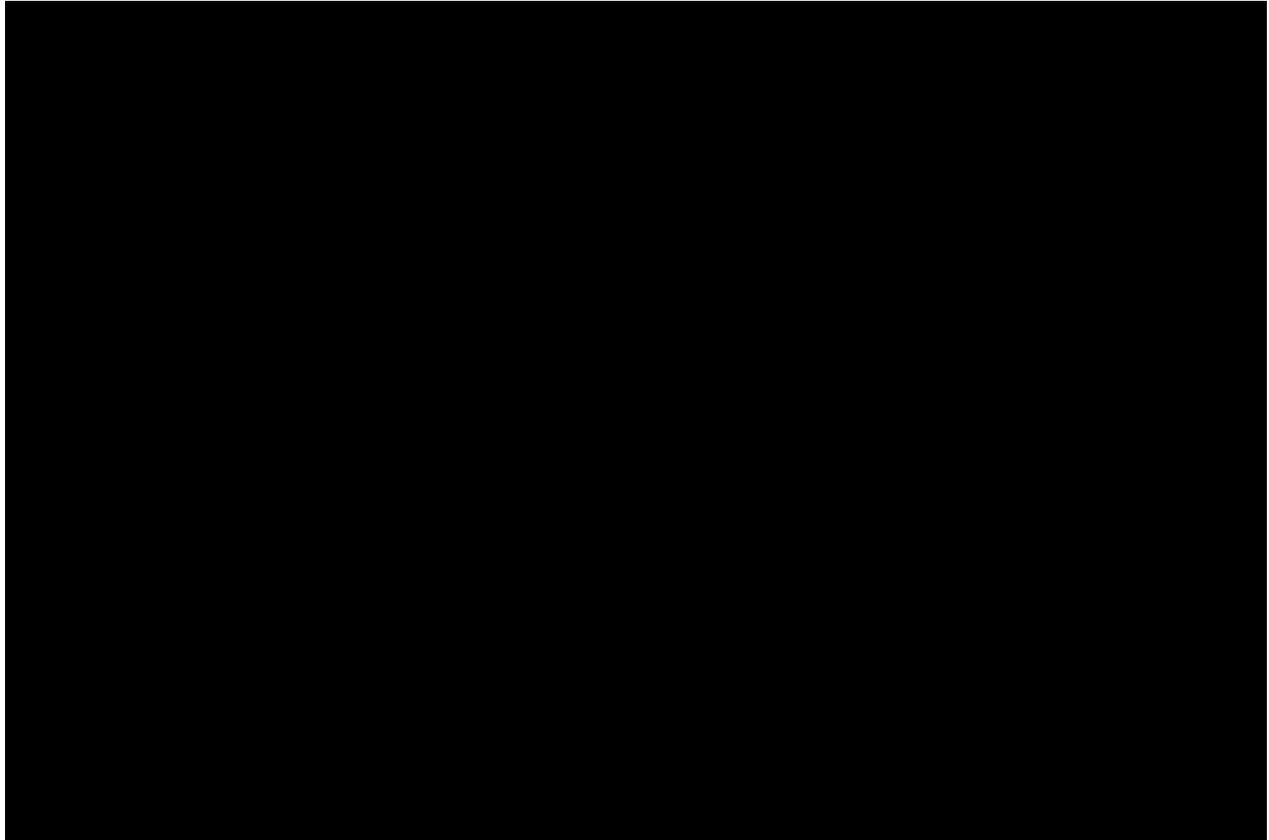
Many in the industry defended Cosell and pointed out his close relationship with boxing champ Muhammad Ali in defense for what some considered a slip of the tongue. Cosell wasn't the only bombastic announcer to put his foot in his mouth. CBS's Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder, a contributor to their NFL pregame show. Snyder was the show's popular game prognosticator. He would break down winners and losers of each game in his segment, going as far as predicting the score of the game. This was a relatively new type of pregame segment that was clearly directed toward America's (mostly illegal) gambling community (of course, now, this is a common practice on every pregame show as well as providing hints on which players would be best to use for your fantasy sports teams).

Snyder eventually got caught up in a scandal which led to his firing when he attempted to address racial equality in sports. CBS responded quickly to the incident and Snyder was fired.

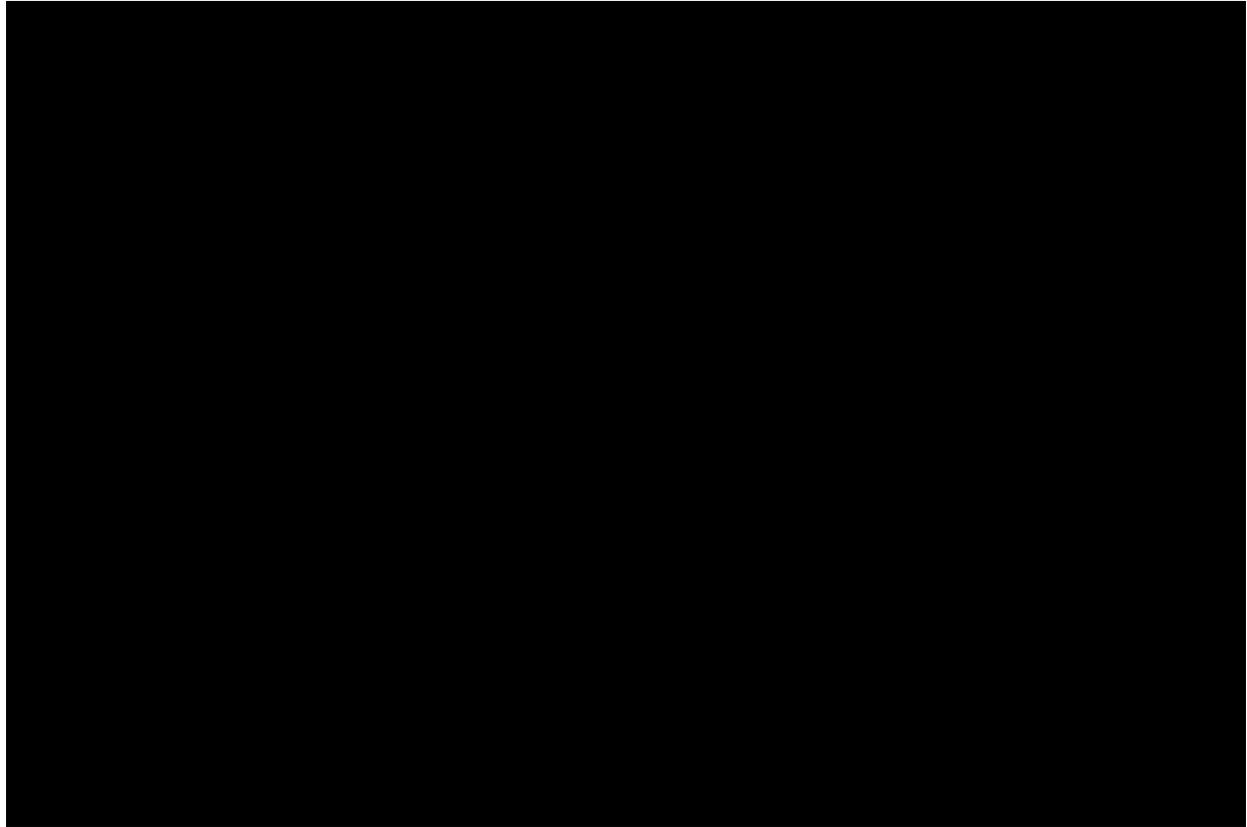
Like Cosell, his credibility was permanently damage and he faded into obscurity.



But, the early years of bombastic announcing wasn't all scandal. Out of this era emerged the aforementioned Scully, Enberg, Pat Summerall, and Al Michaels. Michaels, who is still announcing today, cemented his legacy early in his career with his famous, impromptu "Miracle on Ice" call during the 1980 Winter Olympics when the United States men's hockey team went on an unlikely run to a gold medal.



The 1980's also saw the emergence of former Oakland Raiders head coach John Madden as a color analyst. Paired with Summerall as CBS's top announcing team, Madden introduced the audience to his folksy humor and animated sense of excitement ranging from how he analyzed plays with his bombastic, loud language and erratic squiggles on replay monitors.



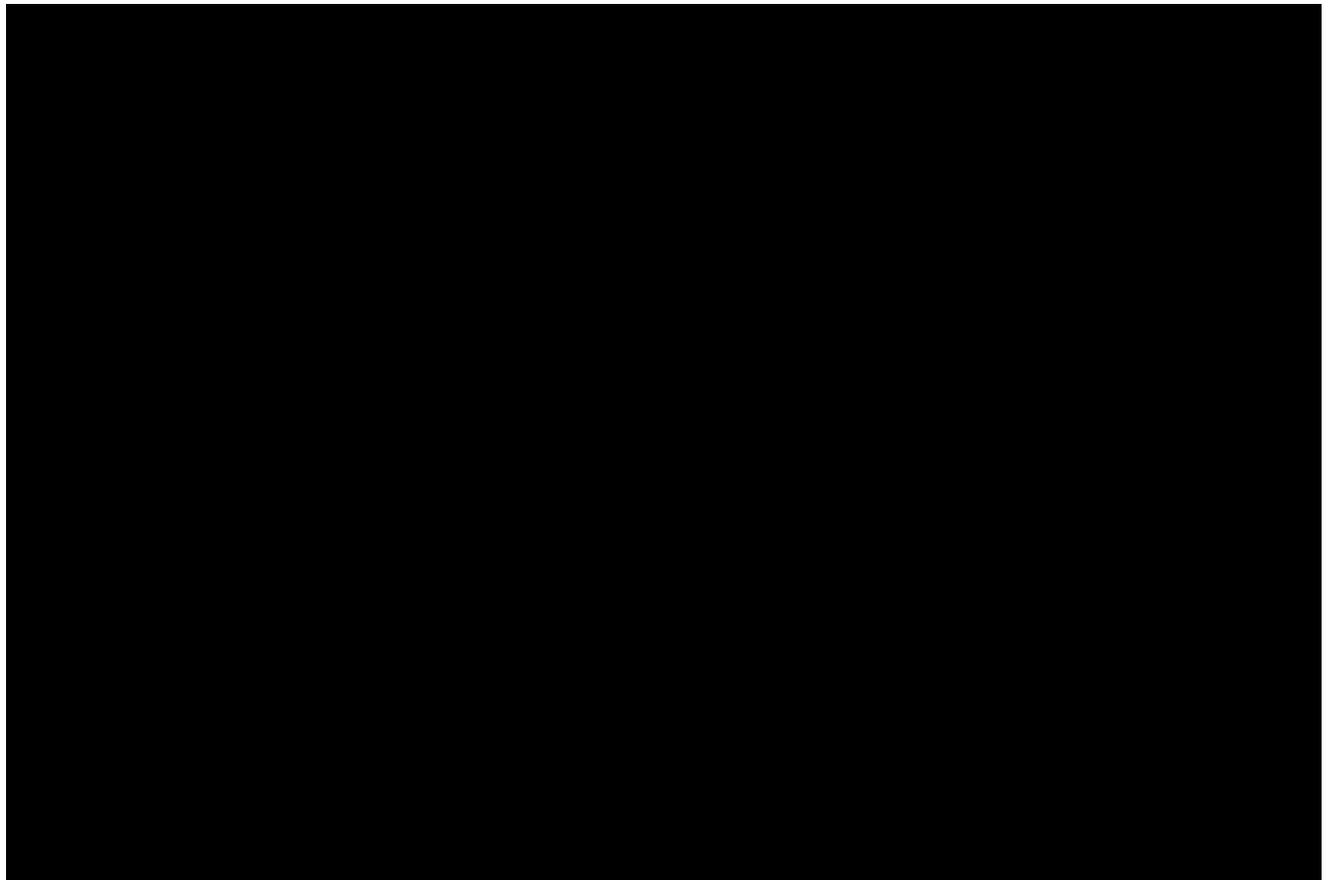
Madden eventually parlayed his bombastic style into a brand. EA Sports created the video game John Madden Football in 1988. The brand, now called Madden NFL exists to this day. Earlier versions of the game featured Madden commentating on the play. Modern versions don't even feature the announcer's voice but the game still bears his name.

Madden's style, which included a multitude of catchphrases, would soon be emulated by a fledgling sports network based out of Bristol, Conn.

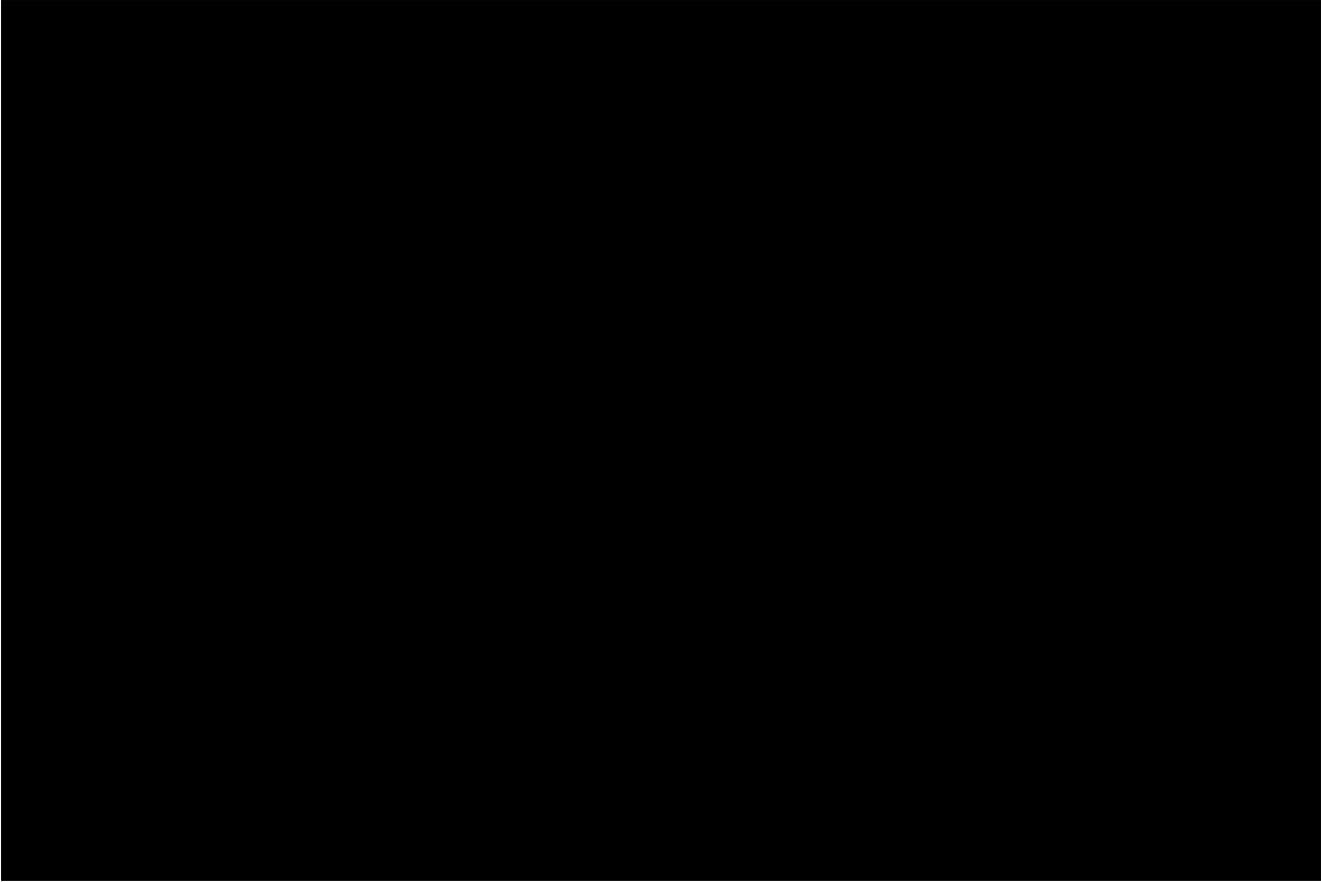
How ESPN Changed the Game

If you wanted sports highlights and, eventually, unique in-game commentary, in the 1990s, you were more than likely tuned in to ESPN. The network's flagship highlight show, SportsCenter, evolved in this era from just the pictures and stats to announcers injecting their own catchphrases, humor, fandom, and style. The show's anchor soon took on a similar role as a radio DJ—it was as if they said out loud what you were thinking. The hosts were like old friends sitting next to you in the sports bar getting just excited as you were about the day's top plays. The anchors weren't just reporting about the game—they were immortalizing them. Home runs became larger than life, touchdowns became monumental accomplishments, and dunks became thunderous exclamation points.

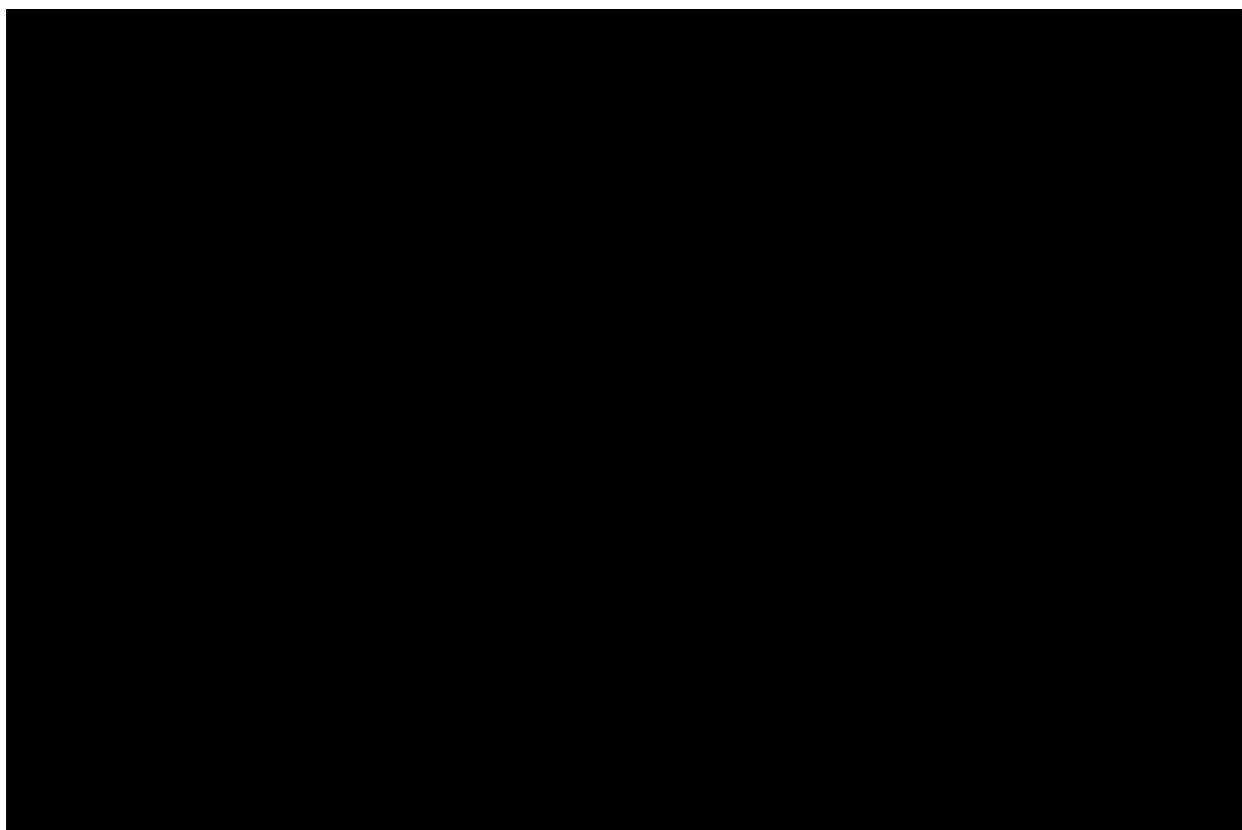
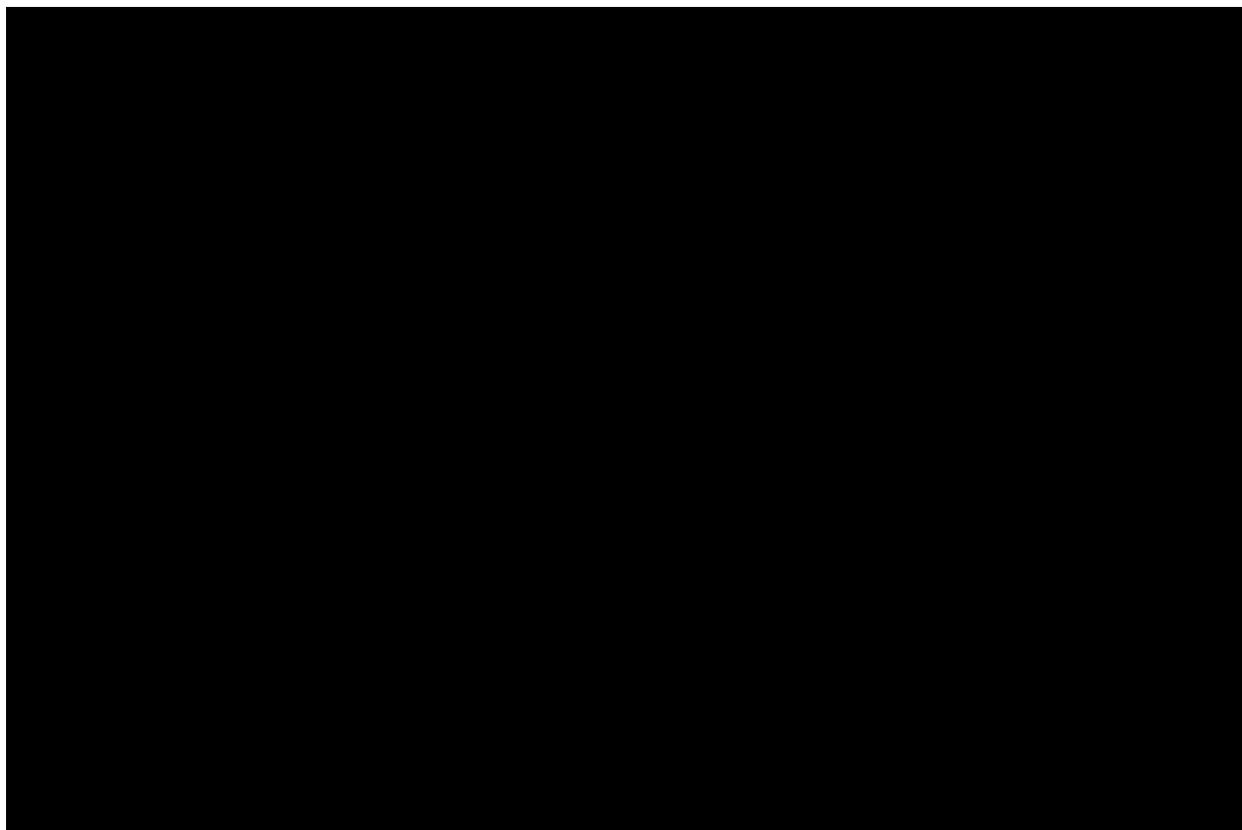
And, if you watched SportsCenter, you soon realized that each anchor was trying to outdo the other. Chris Berman, Dan Patrick, Keith Olbermann, Craig Kilborn, Stuart Scott, and Rich Eisen became household names and their antics and catchphrases became a part of sports lexicon. And, the emergence of Stuart Scott introduced Hip-Hop culture to sports announcing. Like his white counterparts, Scott liked to use song lyrics, street slang, and unique nicknames as a part of his arsenal while performing for the viewing audience. For people of color, Scott broke through ESPN's seemingly white barriers.



ESPN in the 1990s also saw the emergence of Dick Vitale, a former college basketball coach with a larger than life personality whose catchphrases and excitability became a part of ESPN's college basketball coverage.

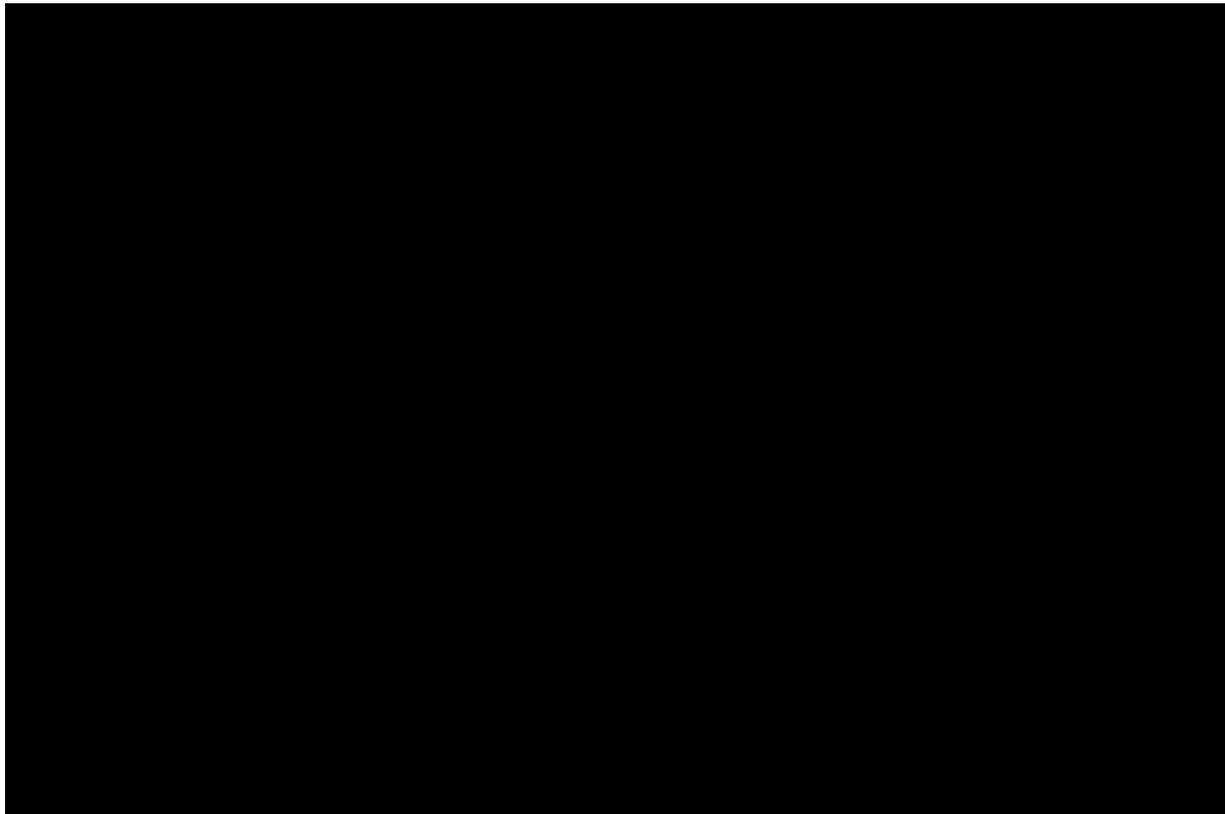


ESPN still uses this formula today but is mainly used in shows that rely more on commentary than highlights. A modern example would be Stephen A. Smith, who is the network's highest paid personality. Much like his predecessors, his show personality is larger than life. He generally picks a sports subject that he seems passionate about and gets overexcited and very animated. This leads to Smith essentially screaming his opinion to his audience. Again, the Howard Stern Effect is in action when it comes to Smith's presentation.



Pop Culture's Response to Bombastic Announcing

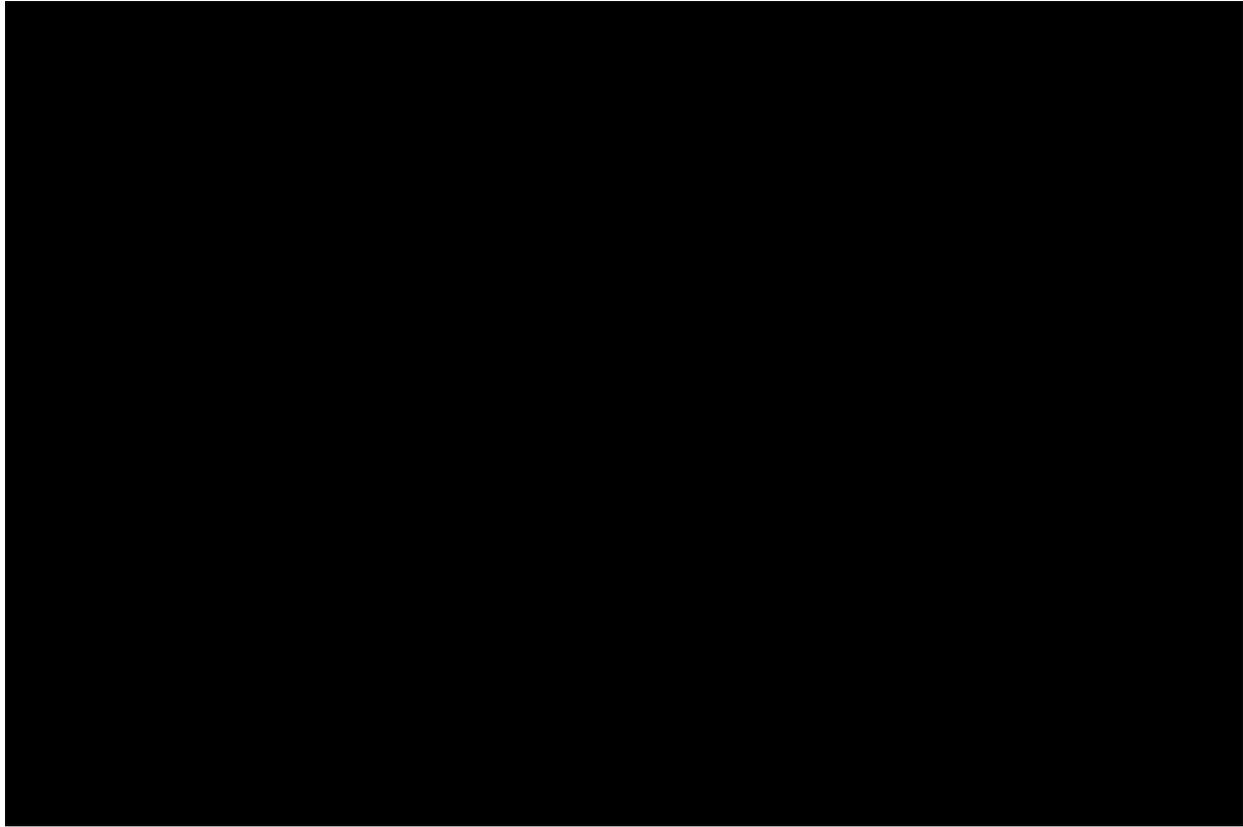
ESPN's popularity in the 1990s soon bleed into pop culture. The band Hootie and the Blowfish's video for the song "Only Wanna Be With You" was a SportsCenter parody. At the time, the band was basking in the glow of it mega hit album "Cracked Rear View." The video features a number of SportsCenter personalities and big-name athletes at the time, including Miami Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino.



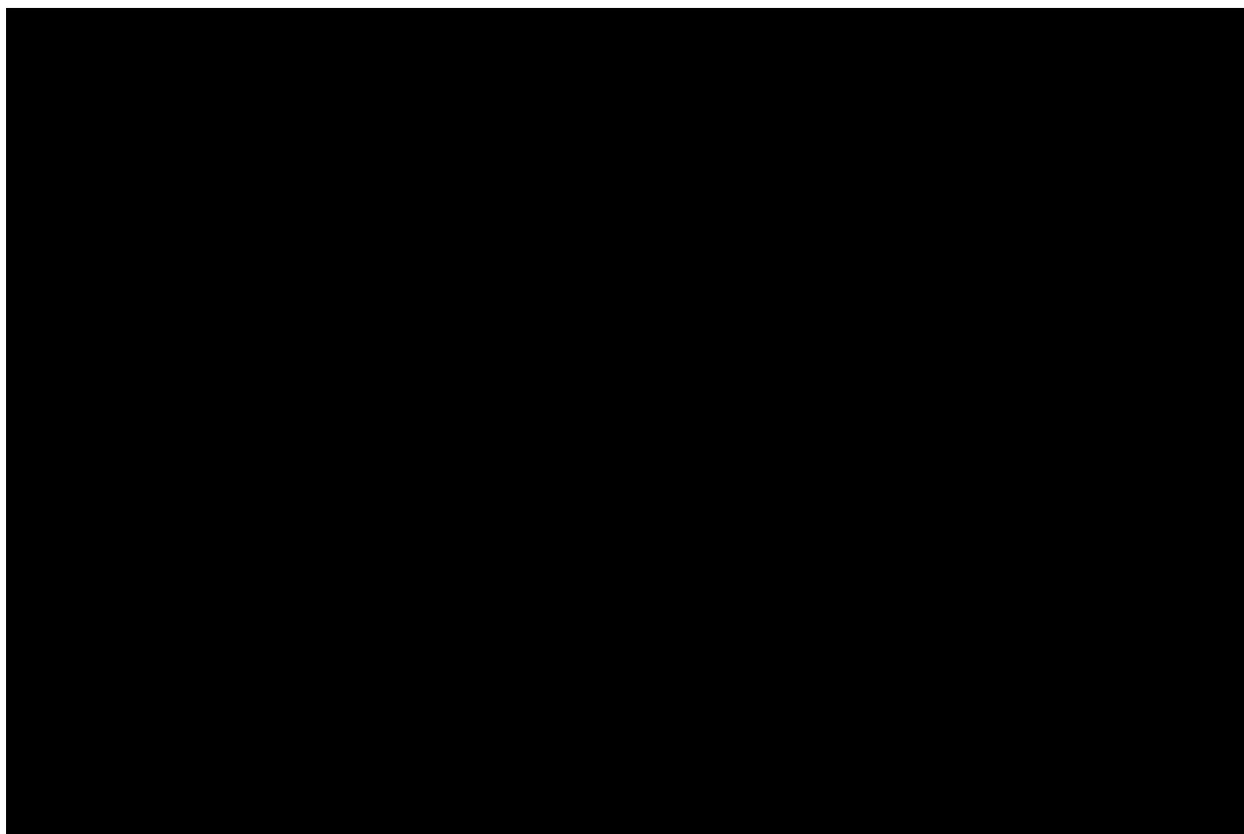
SportsCenter would be also used in movies like "The Waterboy" and "The Longest Yard" and would also be the model for the highly acclaimed Aaron Sorkin short-lived television show "Sports Night." SportsCenter and its anchor would also be parodied on Saturday Night Live.

But the 1990s wasn't the only era for sports announcing parody. Meatloaf's "Paradise By The Dashboard Light" from his 1977 album "Bat Out of Hell" featured former New York

Yankee player and radio announcer Phil Rizzuto narrating a scene in the song that is a tongue and cheek play of “rounding the basses” and teen lust.



In addition, the 1980’s hit movie “Major League” features former Major League Baseball player and later Milwaukee Brewers announcer Bob Uecker as the sarcastic radio announcer for the hapless Cleveland Indians. He would revisit the role in the movie’s two sequels.

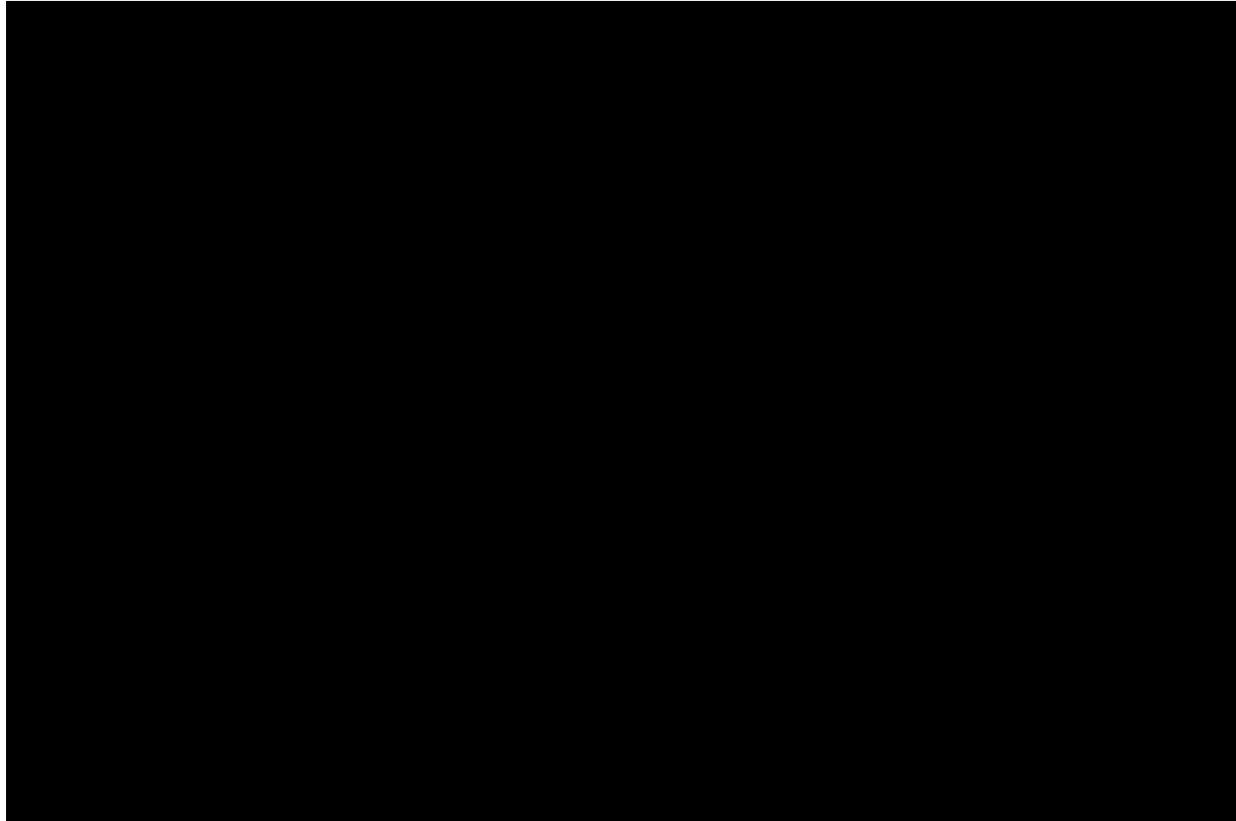


Sports Radio's Role

In 1987, New York's WFAN became the world's first sports radio station. Since then, countless other networks have sprouted up and many markets have multiple radio stations using the format. In fact, here in Richmond, Va., which hovers around the 68th largest U.S. media market, has three all-sports formatted stations. The growth can be attributed to ESPN's popularity and expansion into the market as well as FOX Sports and CBS Sports. One of the mediums longest running shows is the Jim Rome Show.

Rome, who was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 2019, has a show that is heard across the nation. He has also appeared on shows for ESPN and FOX Sports and currently appears on CBS's sports networks. His show is unique in the fact that the listeners, or "clones" (the show's in-group) have their own lingo and inside jokes that Rome plays along with. The show even has its own digital dictionary created by a fan, the [Jim Rome Smacktionary](#).

But, the trappings of the show are that some critics consider it to be steeped in homophobia and heterosexism (Nyland, 2004). Rome tends to allow guests to call and give, what is called their own "takes" or sports opinions. Sometimes, callers have a legit opinion, while other times, the callers use their time on air to take a "run" at another caller or a taboo sports subject. And, pop culture references are also show fodder. Think lowbrow locker room talk meets modern pop culture references. The show even has an annual "Smackoff," which features selected fans opportunity to insult other fans. Rome and his production team selected a winner each year.

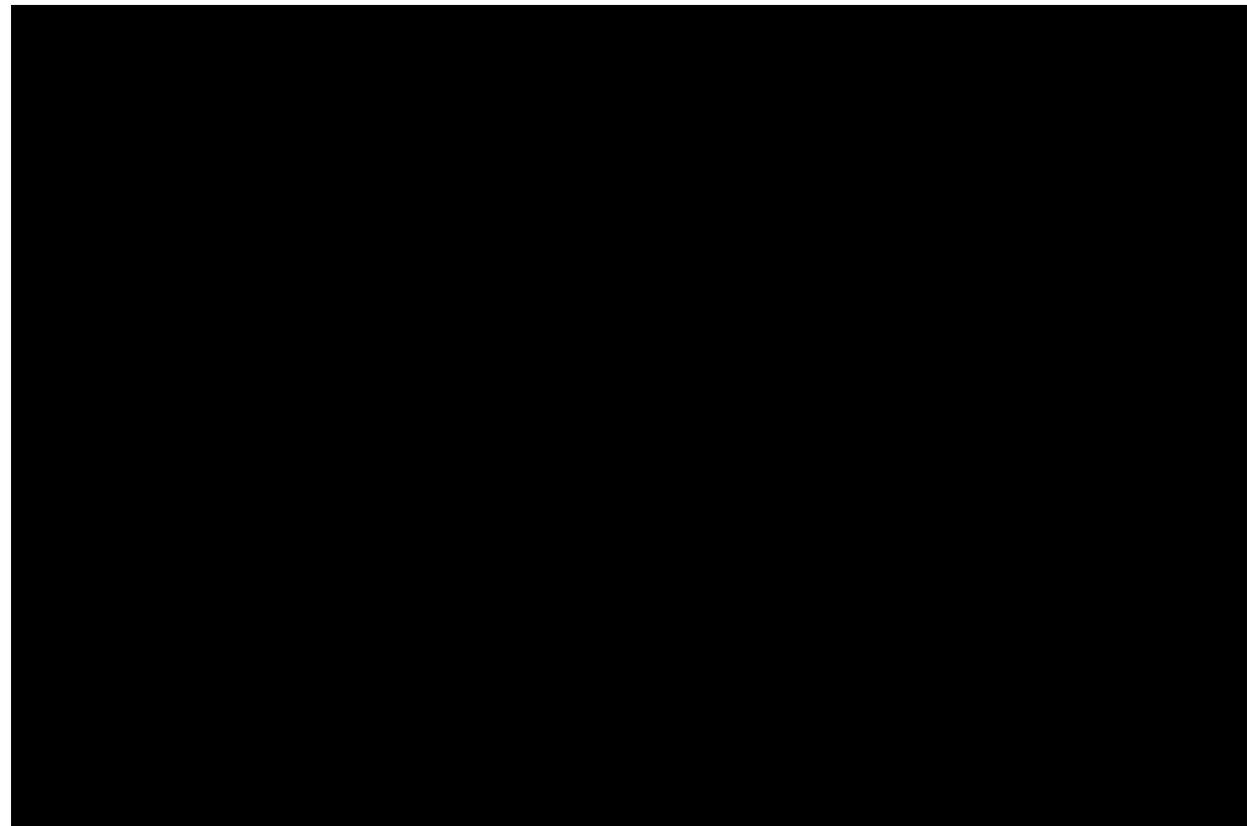


Rome is known for his strong opinions and his penchant for poking fun at high profile athletes. In the following clip, Rome takes his needling too far with former NFL quarterback Jim Everett, who he would emasculate on the airwaves by calling him Chris (in reference to female tennis star Chris Everett-Lloyd). Everett challenges him to continue calling him Chris, which eventually leads to an on-air scuffle.



In addition, Rome will take calls from his audience, “run” or dismiss their call but spend the next few minutes of the segment dissecting what the caller said. Nyland points out that this could be considered Rome’s tactics could, on one hand, be considered a form of male bonding. On the other hand, the “sports bar homosocial space” can be considered “offensive to gays and women” (Nyland, 2004).

In the following clip, observe how Rome resets the caller’s mockery of someone who has AIDS. Rather than move on, Rome repeats the opinion, possibly faking disgust for the comment in the process, and brings more attention to the opinion while outwardly appearing to be disgusted by the remark. The interchange could be taken and interpreted in multiple ways.



According to a study by John D. Reffue there are four “through lines,” typical subject matter, attitudes, and language employed by Rome (Reffue, 2005).

1. Rome’s sarcastic derision of his listeners is a staple of the show. He stereotypes the “clones” as unemployed, pathetic losers who continue to live with their parents well into middle age and have absolutely no ambition. This subtext ultimately led to some of Rome’s fans creating the website “LiveWithMom.com”;
2. Rome’s loyalty to his southern California roots leads him constantly to chide the people and sports teams of northern California, particularly the San Francisco bay area. It is not uncommon for Rome and his clones to call people from northern California “water hoarders” for not sharing their water with their neighbors in the south or “battery chuckers” for the local fans penchant for throwing hard objects, including alkaline batteries, at opposing players from the Los Angeles area during games;

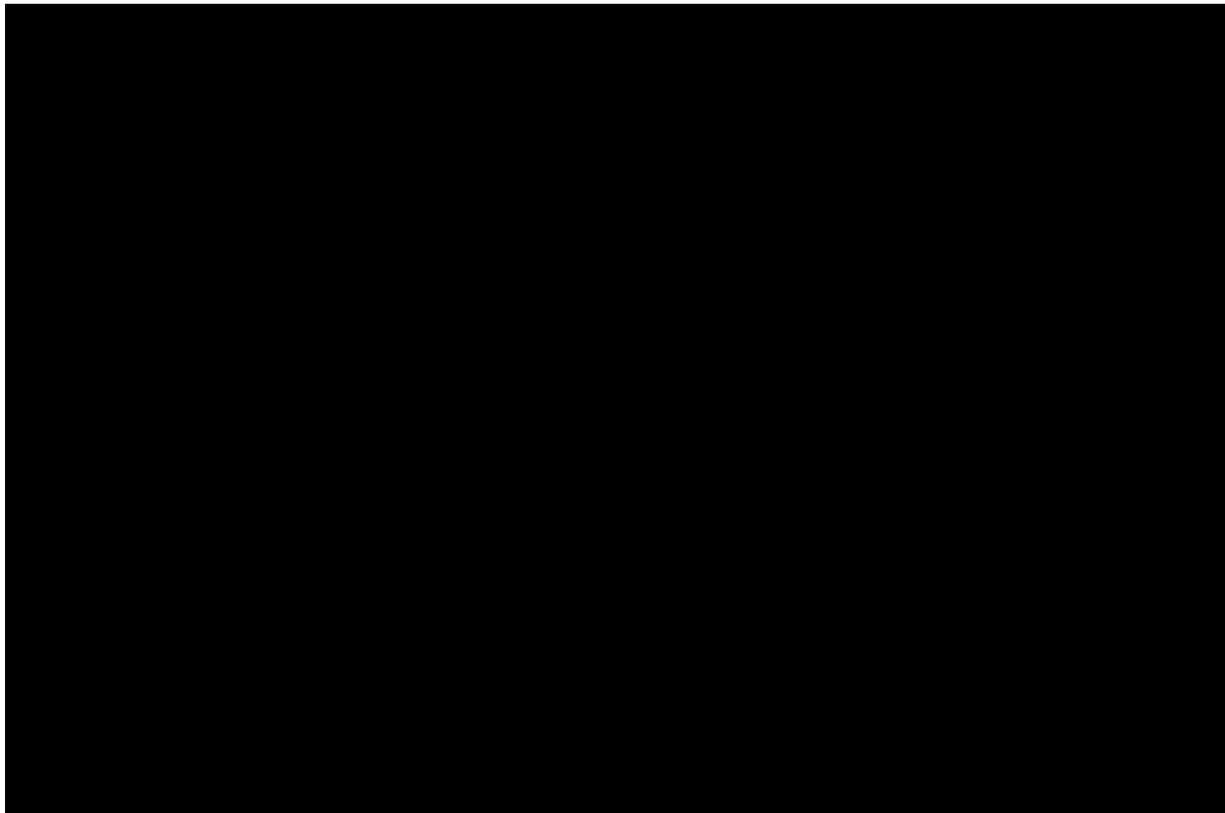
3. Rome's constant attacks on sports figures and celebrities who run afoul of the law is a third staple. For nearly four full years after O.J. Simpson was accused of killing his former wife and a waiter, Rome and his callers mercilessly derided Simpson in innumerable ways. Rome often references his mythical "Celebrity Drunk Bus" as a preferred alternative to drunk driving that celebrities always seem to forget. When former University of Michigan head football coach Gary Moeller was arrested for drunk driving several years ago, Jim Rome was extremely vocal in his criticism of him. That arrest prompted the creation of a new verb on Rome's show – Moeller or past tense, Moellered, the act of getting drunk (Rome often describes being intoxicated as being "Moelleredup"). During the week I taped the show, it was revealed that actress Tracey Gold, who played Carol Seaver in the ABC comedy Growing Pains, was arrested for drunk driving. Rome turned her arrest into material for his show;

4. The concept of "Jungle Karma" is a frame that enables Rome to claim magical causes and effects. For years, Rome has advanced the legend that athletes who appear as guests on the show are destined that week to have tremendous success in their games. Guests who cancel scheduled appearances are destined to fail miserably. This "karma" is as legendary to callers as the purported legends of the Sports Illustrated cover curse or the somewhat more modern Campbell's Chunky Soup advertising curse (Reffue, 2005).

The Lack of Representation

The lack of equality for both race and gender have been an ongoing issue in the era of bombastic sports coverage. ESPN's SportCenter did feature some female anchors such as Robin Roberts and Linda Cohn in the 1990s and a slew of newer talent in the 2000s but their roles are limited. Many fill the role of the aforementioned "perky sideline" reporter (Lowry, 2013) or female sidekick used to create tension. Using another Howard Stern analogy, the Robin Quivers role. Krystal Fernandez was the morning news anchor for FOX Sports radio's morning shows. Joy Taylor and Kristine Leahy have both served as news reporter for the Colin Cowherd show, but at times, they are used in a diminished role.

In May 2017, while interviewing Lavar Ball, Cowherd laughed at Ball's comment to Leahy to "stay in her lane" during an interview rather than stick up for his cohost or pull the plug on the interview.



There are a few female hosts such as ESPN's Sarah Spain and CBS's Amy Lawrence, but their shows are not featured in the prime drivetime or workday hours. The only female host to have a show during those coveted hours is the Fabulous Sports Babe, who became the first woman to have a nationally syndicated show on ESPN Radio in 1994 (Krause, 2012).

In addition, a 2005 study found that "ESPN's and Fox's sports highlights shows allowed some space for women's voices, but 86 percent of the news anchor and ancillary reports were delivered by men" (Duncan & Messner, 2005).

And while Stephen A. Smith is ESPN's highest paid personalities, the majority of the network's on-air minorities are ex-athletes. Most of those minorities are black. Very few Latinos, Asian-Americans, and people from the LGBTQ community are represented in the industry. There is also a lack of female play-by-play announcers. And, while it is refreshing to get an insider's view from former athletes and coaches, I find myself questioning their credentials as a sports journalist more often than not. As the industry attempts to evolve and move forward, these are big issues that need to be addressed.

Another issue to consider is the coverage of women's sports. Unless it is the World Cup, women's soccer gets very little coverage. The majority of women's sports coverage is either tennis or basketball (Duncan & Messner, 2005).

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